

A SINGULAR ACCUSATION.

BY M. E. PENN.

ON a certain February afternoon nearly thirty years ago, I, Fred Weston, then studying surgery in the Paris hospitals, was seated at the window of my bachelor chamber on the fourth story of a dull old house in the Isle St. Louis, looking absently at the placid Seine, which flowed just beneath. I was meditating on a subject which had been disagreeably obtruded on my notice that day, namely, my own pecuniary difficulties.

Absorbed in my reflections on this momentous topic, I did not notice a curious scuffling noise on the stairs. My astonishment may be imagined when the door was suddenly thrown open, and there bounded into the room—a huge ape, of the ourang-outang species, which, after performing some fantastic capers, clapped a paw on my shoulder, and accosted me in the familiar voice of my friend Louis Delattre.

To account for this startling phenomenon I must explain that it was Carnival time, and that Louis had assumed the disguise preparatory to joining the throng of masquers on the boulevards.

He was my fellow-student at the Hôtel Dieu; like myself, a thorough Bohemian, though, luckily for him, his pockets were better furnished than mine, his father being a wealthy notaire of the Quartier d'Antin.

"Neat thing in costumes, isn't it?" he said, complacently, removing his mask, and festooning his tail gracefully over one arm, in the fashion of a lady's train. "Your old concierge nearly had a fit when I put my head into his loge just now. But what's the matter?" he added. "You look as dull as a wet Sunday."

"Read that, and you will understand why," I returned, handing him a letter which had reached me that morning.

"From Isaac Ulbach? I thought you had given him the slip when you changed your lodgings."

"No such luck; read what he says."

Louis perched himself on the table, and unfolding the document gingerly, as if it were something in the nature of a grenade, and might go off unexpectedly, he read it aloud:

"' Monsieur,—When you quitted your old lodgings so abruptly a fortnight ago, you omitted to leave your address for inquiring friends, which was unkind to one who takes so much interest in you as I do—'

"Gets so much interest out of you, he means, the old Shylock," interpolated the reader.

“ ‘ I have not lost sight of you, however, and I shall do myself the honour of calling upon you this day week, when I trust you will be prepared to meet your engagements ; otherwise I shall be under the necessity of providing you with apartments free of expense—at Ste. Pélagie.

“ ‘ Accept, meanwhile, the assurance of my distinguished consideration.

“ ‘ ISAAC ULBACH.’ ”

Louis emitted a long, soft whistle as he refolded the money-lender’s letter.

“ The old humbug doesn’t mean it,” he assured me, consolingly. “ It’s just a flash in the pan to frighten you. He knows that you have a rich uncle in England ——”

“ Who will see me at the North Pole before he pays my debts,” I interrupted, gloomily. “ My uncle Probyn is a good-hearted old man, but he has the bad taste to be fonder of his money than of his promising nephew. Moreover, he has a horror of gambling ; and if he knew that the greater part of what I owe had been lost at cards, it would be all up with my ‘ expectations.’ ”

“ Why won’t you let me help you ? ” said Louis, reproachfully. “ You know I have more money than I want. Will a thousand francs cover it ? ”

“ No, nor three thousand.”

He opened his eyes.

“ You are more deeply dipped than I thought,” he remarked.

After staring at me a moment in sympathetic silence, he gave the matter up with a hopeless shrug, and rose, putting on his mask again.

“ Well, anyhow, don’t stop moping in this suicidal hole,” he said. “ Put your cares in your pocket, and come out and see the fun.”

“ Not yet ; I must write to my uncle. I don’t expect he’ll help me, but I’ll give him the chance. I must do the penitent and pathetic.”

“ Write in a shaky hand, with plenty of blots, you know,” he suggested. “ Of course you will go with the rest of us to the Bal Masqué to-night. Have you got a costume ? ”

“ No ; I meant to have hired one, but this affair put it out of my head.”

“ Well, you can get one in the Temple market for a bagatelle. Come down to my rooms this evening ; we’ll dine at the Café Anglais for once in our lives. Au revoir ! ”

And he took himself off, humming a student’s song.

Left to myself, I took up the money-lender’s letter and read it through once more, trying in vain to find a gleam of hope “ between the lines.” I felt dismally certain that my creditor would be as good—or as bad—as his word, and that in the course of a few days I should find myself in a debtor’s prison.

Isaac Ulbach was a Jew, whose mean little shop in the Place du Panthéon was almost as well known in that quarter as the Panthéon itself. Ostensibly a dealer in second-hand jewellery and silver, in reality he was a usurer, and one of the most grasping and rapacious of his tribe, as I had discovered to my cost.

I had flattered myself that, for a time at least, I was safe from his importunities, in the world-forgotten corner of the city in which I had taken sanctuary. For the last fortnight I had been lodging in one of a group of ancient and dilapidated tenements (long since swept away) which formed a sort of cul-de-sac, called the "Impasse du Cloître," at the extremity of the Isle St. Louis, beyond the Rue du Pont Louis Philippe. The one in which I dwelt was at the end of this "no thoroughfare," and was built with the back wall sheer to the river, so that, leaning out of my bedroom window, I could drop a stone into the water. It was a gruesome old house, damp and dark and close, with steep stairs and long tiled passages, and a pervading fragrance of mould and mildew.

A capital hiding-place, however. There were no lodgers besides myself, no visitors, no passers-by; in the very heart of Paris I lived as solitary as a lighthouse-keeper. But if I had buried myself in the Catacombs Isaac would have managed to find me out.

Failing to extract any comfort from his letter, I threw it aside, and sat down to indite such an appeal to my uncle as should not only touch his heart but loosen his purse-strings. But the inspiration would not come at my call. I spoilt half a dozen sheets of paper, scribbled my blotting-book all over with horses' heads, and then gave it up as a bad job. Being by this time heartily tired of my own company, I resolved to take a stroll on the Boulevards, and write my letter when I returned.

The clock of Notre Dame was striking four as I crossed the Pont Louis Philippe. The river flashed and sparkled in the afternoon sunlight, reflecting a cloudless sky; the air was as mild as if the month had been May instead of February. Even Nature seemed to sympathise with the universal holiday.

The Carnival *was* the Carnival in those days, not the dismal mockery it has become of late years, and when I reached the Boulevards the revelry was at its height. The pavements were lined with spectators, and the horse-road thronged with masquers on foot or in vehicles, their costumes forming a mass of variegated brightness which united in fresh combinations every moment, like the changing colours of a kaleidoscope.

Pierrots and Polichinelles, harlequins and diablotins, Turks and débardeurs; English milords, with shark-like teeth, sandy whiskers and Scotch caps; a shipful of sailors, a waggon-load of burlesque Pompiers, then a car of clowns and acrobats, followed by a great cage-ful of monkeys, among whom I recognised my friend. Such a bright, gay, crowded scene, such frolicsome uproar and contagious

gaiety that surely none but a misanthrope could have looked on in disapproval.

For the time, I forgot all my troubles and perplexities, and entered into the spirit of the scene as thoroughly as if I had not a care in the world. But when the crowd began to thin, as the afternoon waned, I suddenly recollect that I had not yet written my letter, and it was now nearly six o'clock. I was just about to turn into the Rue Richelieu, when I was startled to hear myself called by name in a voice unmistakably English. At the same time I received a violent poke in the back with the handle of a stick or umbrella. Turning round sharply to expostulate, to my astonishment I found myself face to face with the very person who had been in my thoughts at the moment—my uncle Probyn.

He was struggling to get through the crowd to my side, looking very much flushed and “flustered,” and tightly grasped the umbrella with which he had assaulted me, and which, like himself, was of rather a plethoric habit.

“Why, uncle!” I exclaimed, as we shook hands, “I can hardly believe my eyes! Who would have expected to see you here?”

“No one who knew me, I should think,” he returned, drily. “You won’t catch me in a Carnival crowd again—Bedlam let loose! I am glad to see,” he added, glancing at me approvingly, “that you have not made a tomfool of yourself like the rest of them.”

“I feel very little in the mood for folly of any sort just now,” I answered, with an ostentatious sigh, considering how I could best open up the subject of my difficulties, and wondering whether it was any rumour of them which had brought him across the Channel.

“Give me your arm, my boy, and let us get out of this racket,” he said, pushing his way through the crowd with the help of the stout umbrella.

“Are you alone?” I inquired, when we reached the comparative quiet of the Rue Richelieu.

“My friend, Drummond, was with me a few moments ago, but I lost him in the crowd. He came over to see his son—you know Sam Drummond, don’t you?—and I thought I might as well run across and have a look at you. But when I called at your lodgings yesterday they told me you had gone away and left no address.”

Here was the opening ready-made, and I plunged into it headlong.

“Why, yes; I was compelled to change my quarters for reasons which —the fact is, uncle, I am in a trifling difficulty.”

He stopped short, tucked his umbrella under his arm, and glared at me through his spectacles.

“Does that mean that you are in debt, sir?”

Calling up as contrite a look as I could assume at so short a notice, I owned the soft impeachment, murmuring something inco-

herent about the expenses of my medical studies—"the cost of books, and—a—lecture-fees ——"

"Books and lecture-fees!" echoed my uncle, with scornful incredulity. "Folly and dissipation more likely. How much do you owe, sir? Come, you had better make a clean breast of it."

Taking my courage in both hands I named the sum-total. The torrent of indignation that descended on my devoted head would quite have overwhelmed me, if I had not been aware that my uncle's wrath, like a tropical thunderstorm, was brief in proportion to its violence.

His lecture lasted all the way from the Rue Richelieu to his hotel in the Rue St. Honoré; by that time he had talked himself out of breath, and was considerably calmer. A glass or two of Médoc and a rest in an easy-chair had such a happy effect on his temper that, after a little more grumbling, sotto voce, he called for pen and ink, and produced—his cheque-book. He had taken up the pen, and I was already beginning to pour out my thanks, when he paused—ah, that pause!

"On second thoughts, I won't give it you now," he said. Then seeing how my face lengthened, he added: "Oh, you shall have it, but I'd rather send it to you. Shall you be at home at seven o'clock? Very good; give me your address."

I complied, and as he did not ask me to stay, and indeed, for some reason, seemed anxious to get rid of me, I soon afterwards wished him good-bye. He was returning to England the same night.

For the life of me I could not understand why he preferred to send the cheque instead of giving it me at once; however, as I trusted his promise, I did not trouble myself to conjecture his reasons for delay. It was enough for me that in another hour the precious document would be in my hands, and to-morrow I could free myself from the hateful bondage of debt.

Relieved of the weight which had oppressed them, my spirits went up with a bound; I found myself humming Louis' song, "La vie a des attraits," and executing an impromptu pas seul on the pavement. Would not I distinguish myself at the Opera Ball to-night! I felt as if there were quicksilver in my heels.

Before going in search of a costume, I resolved that I would drop in "permiscuously" on Isaac Ulbach.

I hailed the first empty fiacre that passed me, and drove to the Place du Panthéon.

His shop was open as usual—little cared he for fêtes and holidays—and he was in the little dark den at the back, occupied with a couple of rather shady-looking clients.

I burst in upon him sans cérémonie.

"A hundred thanks for your billet-doux received this morning," I began. "I had no idea you knew my present address, so you may imagine what a delightful surprise it was to hear from you."

"Yes, I thought it would be," he answered, quietly, glancing at me under his bent brows. He had a hook nose, an obstinate chin, and a mouth that shut like a trap. In other respects he matched his shop, being small and dark, and not too clean.

"But this is a day of surprises," I went on; "I have just seen a relative of mine, who was the last person I expected to meet."

He was suddenly interested.

"A relative? Was it your uncle?" he asked quickly, coming forward.

"You have guessed. It *was* that worthy man, and he—— But you are occupied," I broke off, pretending to be going. "It's of no consequence—another time."

"Of no consequence, dear sir?" the money-lender exclaimed in a tone of plaintive reproach, becoming all at once effusively civil. "But everything that concerns my clients is of consequence to me."

"You take such a deep interest in their welfare—fifty per cent., eh? Well, then, to relieve your friendly anxiety, I'll tell you that my uncle has promised to send me a cheque this evening. So rejoice and sing paens!"

"Chut, chut! not so loud!" he interposed in an undertone, with a glance at his visitors which was anything but flattering to them. "There's no need to announce it pro bono."

"Or for the benefit of your friends there, who are listening with all their ears; very true. I shall call upon you to-morrow. Au revoir!"

"If it is all the same to you, cher monsieur," he answered, with his sly smile, "I think I will call upon you to-night instead. The money may as well be in my pocket as yours, hein?"

"Better; mine has a hole in it. Don't be later than seven, or I shall be gone—and the cheque too."

"I shall be punctual," was his reply, and I had little doubt that he would.

Half an hour later I was in the Marché du Temple, wandering in a wilderness of old clothes, and exposed to a running fire of shrill importunities from the marchandes, every one of whom declared (before I had stated what I wanted) that she had exactly the thing to suit me.

Resisting these temptations, and escaping with some difficulty from one old lady who wanted to invest me, nolens-volens, with a bottle-green overcoat, I continued my search between the rows of little cabins, but for some time unsuccessfully. There were masquerade dresses in bewildering abundance, but they were all more or less tawdry, tarnished, and common-place. I wanted something bizarre, original. At last, after some rummaging in recondite corners, I lighted upon what struck me as the very thing for my purpose, though it was not intended for a "travestissement," being, in fact, the genuine discarded costume of a Californian gold-digger.

(the gold-fever was just then at its height). How it had come there was a mystery, but there it was ; the serge shirt, the great thigh boots, leather belt, and broad-brimmed hat : I should only need a wig and false beard to make the disguise complete. As I had just, so to speak, "discovered gold," there was a beautiful fitness in this costume which pleased my fancy. I struck a bargain on the spot ; the wig and false beard I purchased elsewhere, and drove home in triumph with my spoils.

It was now nearly seven o'clock, and before going upstairs I asked the concierge—a surly, silent old man, whose nature seemed to have got soured with waiting for lodgers who never came—whether he had a letter for me. Yes, he said, grudgingly, there was one ; it had been left by an hotel commissionnaire a few moments previously : and he handed it to me with a distrustful glance, as if he suspected it of containing treason against the state.

I mounted the stairs three at a time, locked myself into my den, and opened the welcome missive.

There was a letter—but where was the cheque ?

A dire foreboding seized me. My heart, figuratively speaking, sank into my boots, as I unfolded the note.

"DEAR FRED,—I thought proper, before sending you the money, to ascertain how that debt of yours had been contracted. Since parting from you this afternoon I have made some inquiries from an acquaintance of yours" (Sam Drummond, I suppose. Humph !) "which have enlightened me considerably on that, and *other* matters." (Oh, Samuel, my friend, I owe you one for this !) "As your own recklessness has brought you into this difficulty, your own ingenuity must get you out of it. You have nothing further to expect from

"Your indignant uncle,

"W. PROBYN."

This was a "crusher."

I sat staring at the letter, quite unable at first to realize my position. Then, in a flash, as it were, I saw the precipice before me.

In a few moments Isaac would be down upon me, hungry for the spoil. I knew him too well to expect to move him by my piteous story, even if he believed it, which was doubtful.

Most probably he would jump to the conclusion that I had appropriated the money to some other purpose, and dire would be his wrath.

Already I seemed to see the walls of Ste. Pélagie looming before me, and once on the wrong side of them, when should I get out again ?

My only safety lay in flight.

I resolved to start at once, and so avoid an unpleasant scene.

I began my preparations in desperate haste, fancying every moment that I heard his footstep on the stairs.

I hastily packed a few necessaries in a carpet-bag ; the rest of

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my clothes, and a select library of medical works, I left him as a parting gift. There was a heap of odd things, however, which I could not take with me, and did not care to leave behind for him to overhaul.

It would take too long to burn them piecemeal, so I resolved to throw them into the river. I crammed them all pell-mell into an old leather portmanteau, putting in all the heaviest things I could find, including a pair of dumb-bells, to weight it.

I had just completed my task when I heard—it was not fancy this time—a footstep on the stairs, and after a pause there was a gentle tap at the door.

I would have given a good deal to avoid the interview, but there was no getting out of it now; I must bear as best I could his reproaches, taunts, and insinuations; I only hoped I might not inadvertently knock him down.

I was just about to admit him when, glancing forlornly round the room, my eye fell on the “digger’s” costume. A brilliant idea occurred to me. Disregarding a second more imperative summons at the door, I hurried on the clothes over my own, and assumed the wig and bushy beard, which were as complete a disguise as could be desired. Having done so, I opened the window and flung the portmanteau into the river, where it fell with a loud splash; then unlocked the door, and confronted my visitor.

It was not the Jew.

So much I saw at a glance, but I had not time to see more; for no sooner had I appeared on the threshold than the stranger, whoever he was, literally flung himself upon me and brought me to the floor, falling with me. Before I could utter a cry his hand was on my throat, the cold barrel of a revolver was pressed against my temples, and, with his face close to mine, he whispered—

“*Where is the cheque?*”

But the words had hardly left his lips when he started, looked at me more closely, then drew back with a sudden change of expression to astonishment and consternation.

“Diable!” he muttered, “it’s the wrong man!”

He stared at me stupidly a moment, then took his hand from my throat, sprang to his feet, and in an instant was gone.

I was too bouleversé by the unexpectedness of the attack to make any effort to detain him; and when I had picked myself up (none the worse for the tumble) and collected my scattered wits, the ludicrous side of the adventure struck me so forcibly that I sat down and laughed till I was exhausted.

Thinking it over, I concluded that my late visitor was one of Isaac Ulbach’s “ugly customers,” who had overheard my incautious mention of the cheque, and had followed me home from the shop. It was easy for him to enter the house without being noticed by the concierge, who seldom put his head out of his loge.

I was still chuckling over the thought of how the thief had been "sold," when once more there was a footstep on the stairs. No doubt about its being Isaac this time, for I could hear him grumbling, under his breath, at having to mount so high.

I hastily adjusted my wig, which had got disarranged in the scuffle, took up the valise I had packed, and presented myself at the door before he had time to knock.

He started and retreated a step, not recognizing me in the least.

"Did you want me, monsieur?" I demanded, politely, in an assumed voice.

"Pardon," he answered, recovering himself, "it is M. Weston I want. I see that I have mistaken the room."

"This is his room, but you won't find him in it," I returned; and, brushing past him, I quietly descended the stairs, leaving him to reconnoitre at his leisure. Apparently he soon discovered the trick, for I had not reached the ground-floor when I heard him hurrying down after me, shouting "Arrêtez! arrêtez!" The concierge emerged from his loge as I passed, but, though Isaac called out to him to stop me, he was far too much startled by my appearance to attempt it.

I got safely out into the street, hurried along the Quai d'Orléans and over the Pont de la Tournelle, and then proceeded more leisurely to Delattre's rooms in the Rue des Ecoles.

He was as far from recognizing me as the others had been.

My story sent him into such fits of laughter that it was some time before he recovered his gravity sufficiently to ask, "What do you intend to do now?"

Having divested myself of my theatrical properties, I had taken a seat and a cigar.

"Smoke, if you will give me a light. Thanks!"

"What are your plans, I mean? You can't go on dodging Isaac for ever. Sooner or later he'll run you to earth, and after that ——"

"The deluge. My good fellow, it's no use asking what are my plans; you might as well put the question to a man shipwrecked on a rock. Suggest something, and I'll do it."

He looked at me thoughtfully, twisting the ends of his neat little black moustache.

"Why not turn 'digger' in earnest," he said, at length, in the coolest way possible.

I started. The idea gave me a galvanic shock.

"Are you serious?"

"Perfectly. You are not wedded to your profession; or, if you are, it is a 'mariage de convenance' without much affection. Take my advice; 'throw physic to the dogs,' as your Shakespeare beautifully says, go out to the new Land of Promise where fortunes are

dug up like potatoes, find a monster nugget, and return triumphant. What do you say?"

"Hurrah for California," I exclaimed, starting to my feet. "I'll go—it's settled. I'm off to the diggings to-morrow. But stay," I added, with a sudden change of tone; "how am I to get there? I have barely enough cash to take me to Liverpool, and as for my passage and outfit ——"

He interrupted me by going to his desk and taking out a plump little roll of notes, which he thrust into my hands.

"You shall repay me when you have found the famous nugget. I'll go with you as far as Liverpool; my father has some friends there, and it will be a capital excuse for taking a few weeks' holiday."

And so, in this off-hand fashion, my plans for the future were settled.

We agreed that, under the circumstances, the sooner I was out of Paris the better, and by noon the next day we were on our way to Calais by the mail train.

Ten days afterwards I found myself on board the good ship *Gold-finder*, bound for San Francisco.

The curtain falls on the first part of my story, to rise again after an interval of two years.

I shall not dwell on my sojourn in California. Suffice it to say that, happier than many of my fellow-adventurers, I found the Land of Promise a land of fulfilment.

Fickle Dame Fortune, after buffeting me so long, took to pelting me with nuggets by way of compensation. I was successful beyond my utmost hopes.

For eighteen months I stuck to the spade and "cradle"; then, being heartily tired of hard work and rough living, I resolved to return to civilisation.

I had more than once written to Delattre, but no letters had reached me in return.

I took ship for Hâvre, intending to spend a month or two in Paris before returning to settle in England.

I was anxious to acquit myself of debt, and to see whether my old friends would recognize me. I rather doubted it when I looked at the ferocious individual my glass reflected, bearded, with bronzed skin and unkempt hair. I should scarcely need a false beard and wig now for purposes of disguise.

It was a bright spring evening when I found myself once more in Paris, loitering along the familiar Boulevards, and attracting more attention than was quite agreeable, for I had purposely delayed "civilising" myself till I had called upon Isaac Ulbach.

I crossed the Seine and made my way to a certain café in the Rue Soufflot, where I knew that the money-lender was in the habit of taking his petit verre in an evening.

It was a dull and dingy little place, chiefly frequented by lawyers' clerks, small tradesmen, and the like.

The mistress of the establishment was a plump Jewess, who looked up from her crochet with a startled air when I sauntered in. Indeed, the entrance of such a formidable stranger made quite a sensation in the place ; the habitués glanced at me distrustfully, and the garçon—an overgrown youth, with a shock of frizzy hair like a black mop—backed away from me apprehensively when he took my order, as if he feared I might assault him.

A glance round the room showed me that the Jew was not there, but before I had finished my coffee he came in, nodded to the dame du comptoir, and taking a seat with his back to me, was soon deep in the *Moniteur de la Bourse*.

There was a large mirror opposite to him which reflected my figure at full-length, and presently, as he raised his glass to his lips, he looked up, and our eyes met.

The change in his face was something to remember.

He started, put down his glass untasted, stared at my reflection a moment, as if fascinated, then wheeled round in his chair and looked me in the face. There was something in his expression that puzzled me. It showed not only recognition, but a sort of horrified astonishment.

Before I had time to address him, he rose, and approaching the proprietress, whispered an enquiry which evidently referred to me, to which she replied by shaking her head and shrugging her plump shoulders. After another keen glance at me, he leaned over the counter and whispered to her again. The words he uttered were few, but their effect was electrical.

She dropped her crochet, and uttered an exclamation which caused the habitués to look up from their cards and dominoes, and the garçon to stand transfixed with a coffee-pot in one hand and a cognac-bottle in the other.

"Monsieur Ulbach, what do you tell me ?" she cried.

"The truth, and I am ready to prove it," he answered aloud, and turning round he pointed full at me. "That man is an assassin !"

I started to my feet. Was he out of his senses ?

"Why, Isaac," I exclaimed, "whom do you take me for ? Don't you know me ?"

"I know you very well," was his emphatic reply, as he shook his forefinger at me, "though I have only seen you once before, and that was on the evening of Mardi-Gras, two years ago, at a house in the Rue St. Louis, where you had just robbed and murdered a client of mine."

There was a general exclamation of horror. I looked at him in stupefaction. He was perfectly serious, and evidently believed what he said.

"I remember seeing it in the papers," cried the Jewess, before I

could speak; "the 'Mysterious Disappearance of a Medical Student.' A man was arrested on suspicion of having tracked the young fellow home from your shop, M. Ulbach, but as there was no evidence against him he was set at liberty, and the real murderer was never found ——"

"Till this moment," put in the Jew.

I burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter; it was too ridiculous. Never, surely, had a man been placed in a situation so grotesque and improbable; accused of having murdered—myself!

"It is no joke, as you will soon find," said Isaac, grimly. "Garçon, fetch a sergent de ville."

"Wait a moment," I interposed. "I want to ask you something. Was the 'body' ever found?"

"No; it was thrown through the window into the Seine; a boatman heard the splash, but as the river was swollen by rain, the current was unusually strong, and must have carried it away."

"I see; that accounts for it. The victim was a friend of yours?"

"He was a client of mine," he answered sharply, "and owed me money, a great deal of money, which I should have had that night if you had not robbed him of the cheque—brigand!"

"Gently, Isaac," I said, as gravely as I could; "just put on your spectacles and take a good look at me. Supposing your late lamented client had chosen, for reasons of his own, to disguise himself in a 'digger's' dress, and a false beard, might he not have looked something like me?"

He started, and looked at me closely, but the next moment he shrugged his shoulders with contemptuous incredulity.

"The force of audacity can go no farther! To assume the name and identity of the very man whom you——That is enough," he broke off; "out of this place you shall not go except in custody."

The others murmured their approval, and gathered round with the evident intention of detaining me, by force if necessary, till the waiter returned with a policeman.

Decidedly the joke was getting serious.

"Come, come," I said, "you can't be in earnest. Let me have a few words with you in private and I'll soon convince you of my identity."

I was moving towards the door when he seized me by the arm. I shook him off with so little ceremony that he staggered backwards into the arms of the plump proprietress, who had left her throne behind the counter and joined the group. At the same moment the garçon returned with two policemen, one of whom was in plain clothes.

"That is the man," the waiter said, indicating me.

"Yes, that is the man—the robber and assassin!" cried Isaac, excitedly. "He has just assaulted me, as messieurs here can testify."

Upon that, all the tongues were let loose at once. In vain I endeavoured to explain. I could not even make myself heard, much less understood.

At length the "agent" in plain clothes, who had listened to it all without comment, turned to me and said civilly : "Monsieur will have an opportunity of explaining himself before the Commissaire de Police," which I took as a polite intimation that I might consider myself in custody until further notice.

"If monsieur prefers it, we can have a carriage," he added, considerately. I certainly did prefer it, under the circumstances. So the shock-headed garçon was despatched for a fiacre, which I entered, followed by Isaac and the policeman in plain clothes; he of the cocked hat and sword returned to his beat.

The Commissary of the quarter was a little, yellow, high-dried man, like a resuscitated mummy, who took snuff incessantly during the interview.

Having listened in silence to the agent's statement and Isaac's charge, he turned to me for my explanation.

In response, I related the story of my escapade pretty much as I have written it here, glancing from time to time at Isaac, as I proceeded, to see what effect it had upon him.

His face was a study. Incredulity, doubt, astonishment, succeeded each other rapidly, giving place by degrees to a half-reluctant conviction.

But when I told of my brilliant success in California, and added that I had returned to Paris for the express purpose of paying my old debt, his expression changed with ludicrous abruptness.

As if a flood of light had suddenly burst upon his mind, he started to his feet.

"It is himself!" he exclaimed, rapturously, seizing my hand. "Ah, cher monsieur, can you ever forgive me for having been so blind?—so—Monsieur le Commissaire," he broke off, "I ask a hundred pardons; I was mistaken. This is indeed my long-lost and respected client."

"That remains to be proved," was the quiet reply.

"How! proved? but I have proved it by recognising him. I am ready to swear to his identity—"

"And a few moments ago you were ready to swear exactly the reverse—a somewhat sudden conversion, M. Ulbach," drily remarked the magistrate, to whom Isaac was evidently no stranger.

"But I had not heard his story then," he explained eagerly; "I did not know—"

"That it would be to your own interest to acknowledge him—just so," put in the other, with a smile. Turning to me, he added: "I forbear to comment on your statement, till I have made further enquiries. The friend you mention will be communicated with at once; meantime it is, of course, my duty to detain you."

This was pleasant ; however, I submitted with a good grace to the inevitable, and, having obtained permission to send a note to Delattre, I bowed to the Commissary, and, with a friendly nod to Isaac, who was loudly protesting against my incarceration, I followed my conductor from the apartment.

He led me down a short passage into a bare-boarded room, where half a dozen men off duty were lounging about the stove ; and here an official at a desk entered my name in the charge-book. Thence I was conducted to one of the cellules de détention—a cheerful retreat, with a stone floor and a barred window commanding an uninterrupted view of a blank wall opposite. He kindly allowed me a lamp and a copy of the *Gazette des Tribunaux* to beguile my solitude, and, having politely hinted that smoking was forbidden, left me to my reflections.

Forbidden or not, directly I was alone I lighted my pipe, and, thanks to the soothing influence, managed to get through the first hour of captivity with tolerable philosophy. But when my tobacco-pouch was exhausted, my patience began to give way. I anathematized Delattre for his tardiness in coming ; I paced about the cell like a caged hyena, consulting my watch half a dozen times in as many minutes.

When another hour had passed I began to speculate as to what would happen if my friend could not be found. Suppose Isaac's testimony was not believed ? suppose I could not prove my identity ? it was on the cards that I might be tried for my own murder, and really I was bound to acknowledge that there was a strong case against me, notwithstanding the absence of the "body."

It was now long past dinner-time, as internal sensations warned me. Recollecting the proverb, "Qui dort, dîne," I stretched myself on the pallet-bed in one corner, and endeavoured to forget hunger in sleep.

I succeeded at length in dropping off, and, though my doze could not have lasted many minutes, I had time for a long and complicated dream, in which I was tried, found guilty, sentenced, and led to the scaffold. I felt the grasp of "Monsieur de Paris," I heard the click of the fatal knife, when —

There was a cheerful sound of voices in the passage outside, the door was thrown open, and there stood Delattre, with the Commissary and his satellites in the background.

I may explain here that my friend's delay in coming was caused by his having been out when the messenger arrived.

He started when he saw me, as Isaac had done, but came forward at once with both hands outstretched.

"Weston, old fellow, is it really you ?" he exclaimed in English.

"I think so," I answered, cautiously ; "I wouldn't swear it. But 'if this be I as I think it be,' I owe something to you, for I found more than one big nugget."

" Didn't I predict it? " he cried, triumphantly, shaking both my hands at once. " Upon my word," he added, looking me over, " now that I have seen you I can make excuse for Isaac. Your own mother wouldn't know you, my boy."

" I trust M. le Commissaire is satisfied," I said, turning to that functionary.

" Perfectly, monsieur. M. Delattre has made a statement which confirms yours in every particular. I have the pleasure to set you at liberty, regretting that you should ever have been detained."

" And now," said I to Louis, as we left the building arm-in-arm, " perhaps you will tell me why you never answered my letters? "

" Parbleu! but I did. You never got mine? Then they miscarried. In the first I wrote I gave you a full, true, and particular account of your own 'murder,' which was the first piece of news I received on my return to Paris after a month's stay in England. As the nine days' wonder of your disappearance was over by that time, and the subject nearly forgotten, I thought I might as well leave you to enlighten the public when you returned. The mystery has had a dramatic dénouement, thanks to Isaac, who —— Parlez des anges!" he added, in an undertone, "here he is." He had been waiting for us outside. " Monsieur Ulbach," said Louis, gravely, "allow me to present to you your 'late lamented client,' who seems very little the worse for his sojourn among the fishes."

" Ah, monsieur!" cried Isaac, piteously, "if you could only imagine how I reproach myself ——"

" Enough!" I interrupted. "Come to my hotel, and we will settle accounts at once, unless you have still some lingering doubts of my identity."

" If he has, the touch of the money will dispel them," was Louis' remark.

" And you will try to forget that preposterous mistake of mine, cher monsieur? "

" No, no! it's too good a joke to be forgotten," I answered, laughing. " Whenever I speak of my return from California, you may be sure that I shall tell the story of that singular accusation."

